



# Coping with a Participant's Death: When the Unthinkable Becomes Inevitable

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April 2021

According to the White House ONDCP, there were approximately 88,000 drug overdose deaths in the US in the year ending August 2020, representing a 27% increase over the previous year. This is the largest ever number of drug overdoses in a 12-month period<sup>1</sup>. Deaths from synthetic opioids were up 38% between June 2019 and May 2020 compared to the previous 12-month period<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup>White House Office of National Drug Control Policy, April 1, 2021

<sup>2</sup>CDC National Center for Health Statistics, December 2020.

Drug overdose is now the leading cause of injury-related deaths in the United States, surpassing automobile accidents and firearm deaths and contributing to decreases in our life expectancy for the first time since World War I.

CDC Injury Center: Opioid Overdose Statistics

The five states with the highest rates of drug overdose deaths in 2018 were as follows (all adjoining states):

1. West Virginia (51.5 per 100k)
2. Delaware (43.8 per 100k)
3. Maryland (37.2 per 100k)
4. Pennsylvania (36.1 per 100k)
5. Ohio (35.9 per 100k)
- ...
45. Georgia (13.2 per 100k)

CDC Injury Center: Opioid Overdose Statistics

While Georgia is 45<sup>th</sup> in terms of drug overdose deaths at 13.2 per 100k, is it 29<sup>th</sup> out of 38 states ranked in terms of opioid-related overdose deaths and 12<sup>th</sup> of all states and Washington, D.C. in terms of opioid prescription rate (63.2 prescriptions per 100 people; average of all states is 51.4 per 100)

CDC Injury Center: Opioid Overdose Statistics

In 2018...

Over 60% of GA drug overdose deaths involved opioids

Decreases were observed in both prescription opioid-involved deaths and those involving synthetic opioids other than methadone (mainly fentanyl and fentanyl analogs)

Deaths involving heroin however continued to rise

CDC Wonder: [CDC WONDER](#)

These reversals were short-lived, in that both opioid-involved and heroin-involved overdose ED visits/hospitalizations increased from late 2019 to early 2020

These trends echo national trends, and are associated with the global pandemic

[HTTPS://DPH.GEORGIA.GOV/DRUG-SURVEILLANCE-UNIT](https://DPH.GEORGIA.GOV/DRUG-SURVEILLANCE-UNIT)

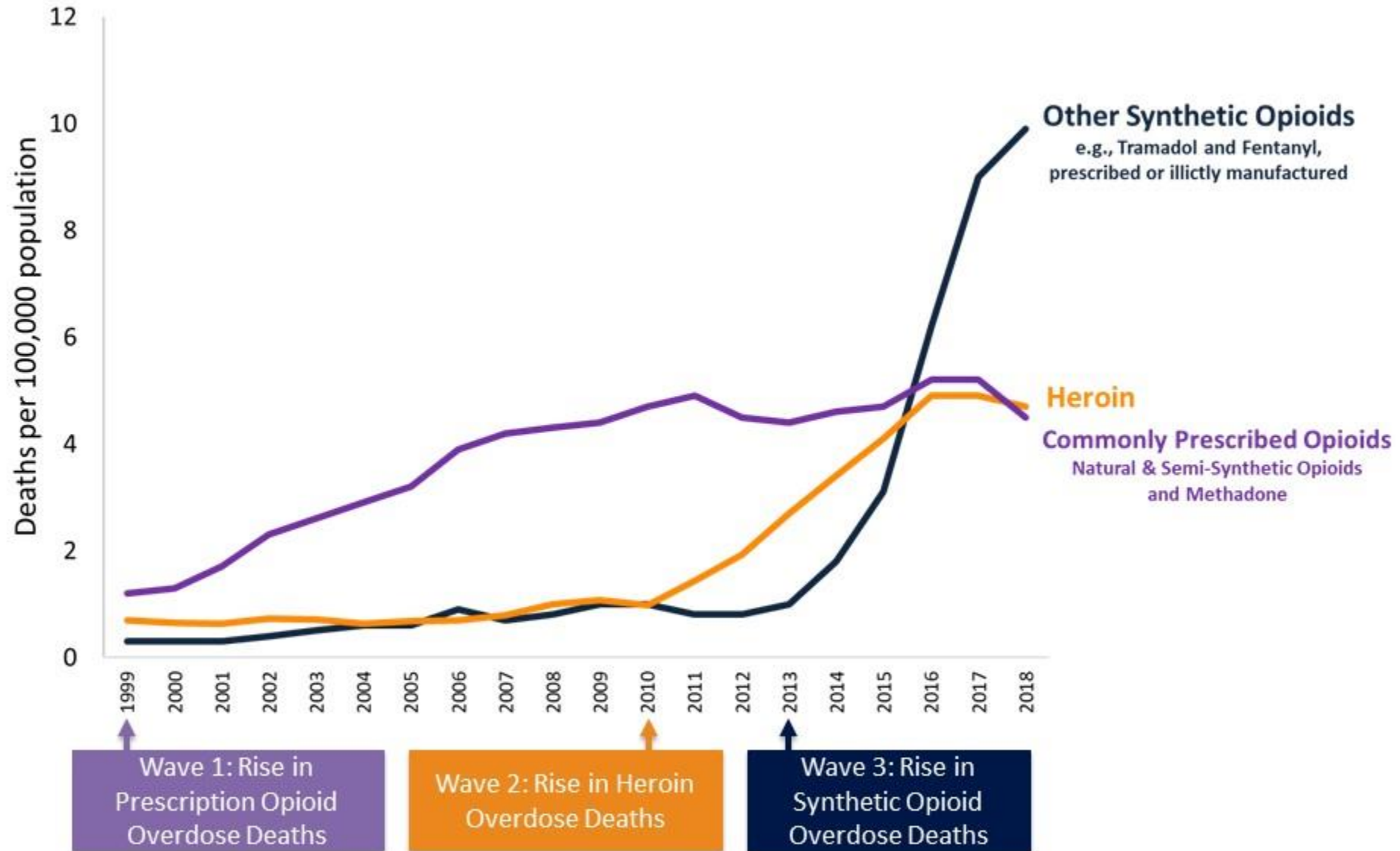


More than 40 states have reported increases in opioid-related overdose deaths during the pandemic, with increases recorded as being about 20% higher in March, 30% higher in April, and 40% higher in May of 2020 compared to the same months in 2019

Washington Post: Coronavirus has caused a huge spike in drug overdoses nationwide, July 1, 2020.



### 3 Waves of the Rise in Opioid Overdose Deaths



SOURCE: National Vital Statistics System Mortality File.

Disruption of treatment services and recovery supports has left individuals increasingly isolated and removed critical coping systems and supports

Washington Post: Coronavirus has caused a huge spike in drug overdoses nationwide, July 1, 2020.

Interviews with drug users and treatment staff show that users typically experience multiple overdoses over the course of their substance misuse

A survey of 1,013 respondents conducted by the American Addiction Centers found that 54% of respondents know someone who died of a drug overdose; Rates were highest among millennials at just under 59%

Degrees of Separation: [americanaddictioncenters.org](http://americanaddictioncenters.org)

Witnessing and/or experiencing a drug overdose is associated with PTSD<sup>1</sup>

Drug overdose is the leading cause of death following release from prison – 12.7 times higher than in the general population in the two weeks following release<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health

<sup>2</sup> ROAR – Reducing Overdose After Release - NIH

Those who abuse prescription opioids are relatively less informed than are injection drug users regarding overdose awareness, avoidance, and response strategies – despite having significant experience with overdoses and overdose fatalities

High risk and little knowledge: Overdose experiences and knowledge among young adult nonmedical prescription opioid users (NIH.gov)

The take-away message: Taken together, these alarming statistics all point to the inevitability that your court will experience at least one overdose fatality among your participants



Our responses therefore must be:

coordinated

comprehensive

collaborative

compassionate

Prevention Focused Public Health  
Erie County (NY) Opiate Epidemic  
Task Force – a comprehensive,  
community-wide collaborative  
employing a wide range of  
coordinated primary, secondary, and  
tertiary prevention services – a  
national model for reducing deaths

Opiate Epidemic Task Force | Erie County, NY Department of Health

These boxes are widely distributed around Erie County, placed adjacent to Automatic External Defibrillator (AED) boxes. They contain two doses of Narcan, nitrile gloves, a CPR breathing tube, instructions, and information on the county-wide initiative



# Prevention Focused Public Health Overdose recognition and response training<sup>1</sup>

## Overdose Education with Naloxone Distribution (OEND)<sup>2</sup>

## Increased availability of naloxone

<sup>1</sup>D&A Communiques: How to Prevent a Death Due to Opioid Overdose.  
Allegheny County

<sup>2</sup>Illinois Department of Human Services, among others

# Georgia Resources

Georgia Council on Substance Abuse  
([gasubstanceabuse.org](http://gasubstanceabuse.org))

Georgia Prescription Drug Abuse Prevention  
Initiative ([stoprxabuseinga.org](http://stoprxabuseinga.org))

Georgia Overdose Prevention  
([georgiaoverdoseprevention.org](http://georgiaoverdoseprevention.org))

Video teaching administration of naloxone is available at:

[WATCH: HOW TO SAVE A LIFE WITH NALOXONE \(PA.GOV\)](http://PA.GOV)

## Coping Following a Fatal Overdose

Very little relevant research exists; that which does suggests that the experience is similar to when a loved one commits suicide – the deaths are sudden, and carry both moral and social stigma

Understanding grief after an overdose death: [umassmed.edu](http://umassmed.edu)

# Coping Following a Fatal Overdose

Three common questions asked by survivors:

Why did the person die of an overdose?

Was the death intentional?

Was the death preventable?



# Coping Following a Fatal Overdose

As treatment court professionals and clinicians, we often feel that the death should have been avoidable, despite previous non-fatal overdoses and indications that up to 40% of friends and acquaintances were not surprised by the overdose of a friend or loved one

Degrees of Separation: [americanaddictioncenters.org](http://americanaddictioncenters.org)

## Emotional Responses

Shock, disbelief, sense of confusion

Helplessness and/or hopelessness

Guilt and/or shame

Anger

Abandonment

Failure

Relief (and guilt for feeling relieved)

Self-blame

Stigmatization

## Other Factors

Younger, less experienced team members may be more at risk for adverse reactions

Dealing with the moral and social stigmatization, along with a sense that the team failed in its primary duty, are difficult barriers to surmount

## Lessons from Those with Lived Experience

Court staff found themselves asking the three questions noted previously; experiencing self-blame, guilt, questioning the benefit of the court – followed by resolve and a commitment to address, rather than avoid, the topic of overdose – with participants, families, and the community.

Added process groups and increased relapse education and prevention with participants.

## Lessons from Those with Lived Experience

Provide individualized treatment that involves the participants (one of the hallmarks of EBTs)

Work to eliminate the stigma around addiction and overdose

Rather than dwelling on what happened, direct energies towards making your court the best it can be and reducing overdoses

## Recommendations

Recognize that participating in SUD treatment presents a potential paradox; while it can reduce or eliminate substance abuse, it can also reduce tolerance, which itself increases the risk for overdose

## Recommendations

Review and selectively implement aspects of the excellent “Opioid Overdose Prevention and Related Trauma: Incorporating Overdose Prevention, Response, and Experience into Substance Use Disorder Treatment”

Available at:

[INCORPORATING OD INTO SUD\\_TXGUIDE\\_HEARTLAND ALLIANCE.PDF](#)  
[\(MARYLAND.GOV\)](#)



## Recommendations

One of the authors of this work, Alice Bell (abell@ppppgh.org), is the Overdose Prevention Coordinator for Prevention Point Pittsburgh. While the authors recommend a holistic approach to incorporating overdose as a consistent topic of SUD treatment, even incorporating a few of their recommendations can be very helpful in addressing the issue.

Available at:

[INCORPORATING OD INTO SUD\\_TXGUIDE\\_HEARTLAND ALLIANCE.PDF](#)  
[\(MARYLAND.GOV\)](#)

## Recommendations

Develop a protocol of steps to take following an overdose fatality

In addition to providing trauma-informed services to clients, your team should practice trauma-informed care with each other

## Recommendations

Utilize identified supports, including each other – this may take the form of a support or grief group, case consultation, and/or supervision

Seek individual support to minimize the trauma associated with the death

Be ready and willing to support colleagues and the participant's family members

## Recommendations

Engage in a process of “meaning making” – searching for and finding meaning in the loss and grieving process, working to construct a healthy self-narrative

Recognize that grief is a process, and not a linear one – it involves periods of adjustment, recovery, and reorganization in what has been described as a “roller-coaster” type experience

## Sources and Additional Resources

*Opioid Misuse or Addiction: Need Help Now?*

Provides detailed information about what opioids are, how to recognize an overdose, and what to do to prevent or respond to an opioid overdose.<sup>1</sup>

*The Opioid Epidemic:* The PA governor's office provides resources for all facing the opioid epidemic.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> OPIOID MISUSE OR ADDICTION: NEED HELP NOW?

<sup>2</sup> THE OPIOID EPIDEMIC

## Sources and Additional Resources

Materials from Prevention Point Pittsburgh

Prevent Overdose Deaths brochure<sup>1</sup>

Prevent Overdose Deaths card<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> [PREVENT OVERDOSE DEATHS BROCHURE](#)

<sup>2</sup> [PREVENT OVERDOSE DEATHS CARD](#)

## Sources and Additional Resources

Supporting Providers After Drug Overdose  
Death<sup>1</sup>

Center for Loss Brochure<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> SUPPORTING PROVIDERS AFTER DRUG OVERDOSE DEATH (NIH.GOV)

<sup>3</sup> HELPING YOURSELF HEAL WHEN SOMEONE YOU CARE ABOUT DIES OF A DRUG  
OVERDOSE (CENTERFORLOSS.COM)



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